

Soviet Decolonization

These days, to exercise self-determination through secession is to blow up the union, to pit peoples against one another and to sow discord, bloodshed and death.

—Mikhail Gorbachev, 1989

I have not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire.

—Winston Churchill, 1942

As the execution of Nicolae Ceausescu deposed the last Stalinist from Eastern Europe, the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies declared the secret protocols of the Hitler-Stalin pact "legally untenable and invalid." Moscow's official position is that is irrelevant to present borders, though the protocols were the historical basis for the Soviet Union's incorporation of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

Chairman Gorbachev also gave a testy speech, evidently triggered by the Lithuanian Communist Party voting for multiparty politics and proclaiming the goal of "a democratic and independent state." Mr. Gorbachev declared himself still a Communist and proud of it. He came to the defense of the Russian people, who account for just over half of the 280 million Soviet population, as "openhearted and humane." He denounced "the secessionists that exist in all republics." The father of glasnost senses that dominoes are teetering.

A visitor from the 19th century would have no trouble recognizing today's events as the collapse of the last of the great empires. Blinkered by modern perceptions, we tend to think of "imperialists" as people who arrive in boats. After World War II, we witnessed the "decolonization" of the British and French empires. We overlook the land empires of Austria-Hungary and the Ottomans, which vanished in the distant mists of World War I. The State Department's background notes on the U.S.S.R. starts its historical section, "Modern Russian history dates from March 1917."

Long before the czars were overthrown, though, Russia boasted a proud imperial tradition. Over the four centuries from 1500 to 1900, its empire grew at the rate of 50 square miles a day. Lay aside Eastern Europe, Mongolia, North Korea, the still-extant puppet regime in Afghanistan, and such overseas outposts as Cuba, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Angola and Vietnam. The Soviet Union itself is an ethnic bazaar; 16 different languages are spoken by at least a million people each. Politically, it is organized into 15 basically ethnic republics (see map), marking Russia and colonized nations.

The Russian empire outlasted its contemporaries thanks to Leninist organization and Stalinist brutality. But over the years the ideological appeal of communism has soured, the brutality has proved unbearable and the overreach of empire has burdened an already backward economy. After the U.S. summoned the will to supply

stingers to the mujahedeen, the Red Army withdrew its combat units from Afghanistan. And Chairman Gorbachev implemented glasnost and announced perestroika in an attempt to salvage the Soviet economy.

Under these circumstances, nothing could have been more predictable than ethnic tensions between the Russians and their subjects, as well as between contending groups such as Christian Armenians and Moslem Azerbaijanis. It is most doubtful, too, that Mr. Gorbachev will succeed in stopping the dominoes with his impending visit to Lithuania. The Hitler-Stalin Pact, after all? The Moldavian republic, the old Romanian provinces of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina, also derives from the same agreement, and the new Romanian government promises elections by April. Troops and poison gas already have been used in the Caucasus, the Turkic Republics are always doubtful, and

The Soviet Republics



the Ukraine harbors an underground church loyal to the pope.

What attitude should the West take to this ferment? The State Department has never officially recognized the incorporation of the Baltic nations or Moldavia, and the West has managed to keep up radio broadcasts into the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. But the radio funding has always been shaky, and the Baltics seldom mentioned. Western policy makers have shied away from the Soviet nationalities issue as overly provocative.

Now we are witnessing the advent of a *Realpolitik* of the left. The Soviet threat is ended, it says, we must now address the threat of a united Germany. Until this problem is solved, it continues, the Russians have a "legitimate" security interest in keeping 380,000 troops in East Germany—lest it decide to join democratic West Germany. Yet even without any ethnic provinces, Russia would be a vast and powerful nation, and perhaps a more prosperous and even happier one.

Western governments and Western publics should be asking publicly and often: why there are 380,000 Soviet troops in Germany, why troops need to be sent to the Caucasus, why a supposedly reformist Chairman Gorbachev won't accede to the clear desire of the entire Lithuanian people. These are the questions the American government and public asked during decolonization of the British and French empires. Now that we have developed a new friendship with the Russians, we owe them no less.

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